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Shochu maker combines best of Japan and Hawaii

Ken Hirata was nervous when Toshihiro Manzen came to visit him from Japan in April, as the shochu master was coming straight from the airport to sample his pupil's first commercial batch of Nami-hana, his Hawaii-made sweet-potato shochu.

For three years Hirata apprenticed under Manzen.

Hirata learned the centuries-old traditions of making sweet-potato shochu, barley, rice, sugar cane or fruit shochu, and brought the knowledge and equipment

to a new facility in Haleiwa to which his sensei was destined that day.

It had been a more than eight-year journey including loans totaling \$175,000 from

the Hawaii Department of Agriculture to build the spartan, off-the-grid facility where he and his wife, Yumiko, are the only employees.

They do everything from cooking the rice that begins the whole process, to filling and labeling the bottles once their distilled shochu has aged for six months in partially underground, century-old ceramic vats, called kamet-subo, from Japan.

It was all on the line.

Manzen tried some poured into a glass from the bottle. He tried it over ice. He tried it

with a bit of hot water added.

Sensei approved.

Hirata let out a sigh and put his hand on his heart to express the relief he felt.



Yumiko
Hirata



Ken
Hirata

His new product is "totally different" from sweet-potato shochu found in Japan, he said. It is made of 82 percent Hawaii-grown sweet potatoes and 18 percent California-grown rice. It's Hawaii that makes the difference, he says. Hawaii's air, water, soil, sweet potatoes "and even things you cannot see or feel."

The name Nami-hana reflects Hawaii's waves (nami) and flowers (hana), and the kanji on the label was a gift to Hirata from master Japanese calligrapher, ceramicist and oil painter Shiro Tsujimura. Hirata's eyes grew big speculating how much it might have cost to hire Tsujimura, who also created the label calligraphy for his sensei's Manzen Shuzo Co. in Japan.

Hirata also expressed deep gratitude that well-known restaurants' chefs and owners also have tasted the unique shochu and have decided to offer it to their customers.

Nami-hana is served at Roy's restaurants, Doraku restaurant, Japengo restaurant at the Hyatt Regency Waikiki, Tokkuri Tei, Restaurant Wada and soon more, via his distributor, the Cherry Co.

While not yet available at retail, Nami-hana costs \$39 a bottle, and Hirata accepts mail orders.

He did not start his adult life aspiring to be a shochu maker.

After his schooling, which included summers in Hawaii with his parents, he began a



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WHERE TO FIND IT

Roy's, Japengo, Doraku Sushi, Restaurant Wada, Tokkuri Tei

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Nami-hana Imo Shochu, a traditional Japanese distilled spirit made with sweet potatoes, is produced in Haleiwa by Ken and Yumiko Hirata.

career in finance in Hong Kong.

Along the way he got involved with "Japanese traditional handcraft development," such as lacquer art, ceramic arts, "kimono stuff, all kinds of Japanese traditional crafts," he said. "I was working with artists to develop new products."

The idea of making shochu popped into his head during a Hawaii visit as he was eating poi. It occurred to him that poi was a kind of fermented food made of taro root, "so I thought maybe we can make shochu with taro."

After extensive research — "there are more than 20 varieties of sweet potato in Hawaii," Hirata said — he

settled on the Okinawan sweet potato. While brown on the outside and deeply vibrant purple on the inside, the shochu it produces is not purple because of the way the distillation process works.

The overarching concept was to "combine both Hawaii culture and Japanese traditional culture," he said.

Nami-hana shochu is 30 percent alcohol by volume, versus sake, which is brewed, at 15 to 18 percent.

Instead of using huge industrial rice cookers, he uses a huge, traditional

wooden rice steamer, called a koshibiki, as a first step. From there every step along the way uses traditional Japanese equipment and is done by hand.

He used Oahu-grown Okinawan sweet potatoes and black koji, the microorganism that enables fermentation, for his first batch. He thinks he'll use white koji, and perhaps sweet potato from another island, for the next.

One of his hopes is to make shochu with differences connoisseurs will appreciate, he said.

"Buy Local" runs on Aloha Fridays. Reach Erika Engle at 529-4303, erika@staradvertiser.com or on Twitter as @erikaengle.